TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY, SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTRY, CONSERVATION AND RURAL REVITALIZATION

CONSERVATOIN RESERVE PROGRAM

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Introduction

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am Dan Forster, Director of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Resources Division (WRD). In this capacity I also serve as Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI) Committee Chair for the Directors of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and as Vice Chair of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Agricultural Conservation Committee. My comments today will generally reflect the views of these organizations.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is arguably the single-most effective conservation program ever developed for agricultural lands. It has made great strides toward meeting the mandate of reducing soil erosion, improving water quality, and enhancing wildlife habitat on working farms. It has helped sustain the family farm and has provided much needed economic infusions into rural economies. In addition to direct landowner payments, in regions of the country where the CRP has boosted wildlife populations, the program has indirectly generated billions of dollars through the increased economic expenditures associated with hunting and other wildlife associated recreation.

My comments today focus on the wildlife conservation aspects of the CRP. In this regard the CRP has improved wildlife habitat and wildlife populations on individual farms and at the landscape scale, particularly in certain regions. For example, in the Midwest and Northern Great Plains, the CRP has been a bonanza for waterfowl, pheasants and a host of grassland songbirds. Across these landscapes populations of many wildlife species have greatly increased, and for some species, population declines reversed. In fact this year the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimate of the breeding population for ducks is 24 percent higher than the estimate in 1985, and much of this increase can be attributed to CRP. Wildlife conservationists at large applaud the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for the success of the CRP.

Unfortunately, the CRP has not been nearly as positive for wildlife in the Southern U. S., and across this region the program can best be described as one of “still to be realized potential.” That having been said, I want to further emphasize that overall the CRP is a program that America needs for the environmental and economic welfare of present and future generations. It has many positive attributes and merely needs adjusting, particularly in the South, to reach its full potential relative to achieving the mandate of equal emphasis on soil, water and wildlife. The following comments are offered in the

spirit of maintaining the positive aspects of the CRP, while strengthening the program in areas relative to wildlife conservation.

Re-authorize CRP In Next Farm Bill

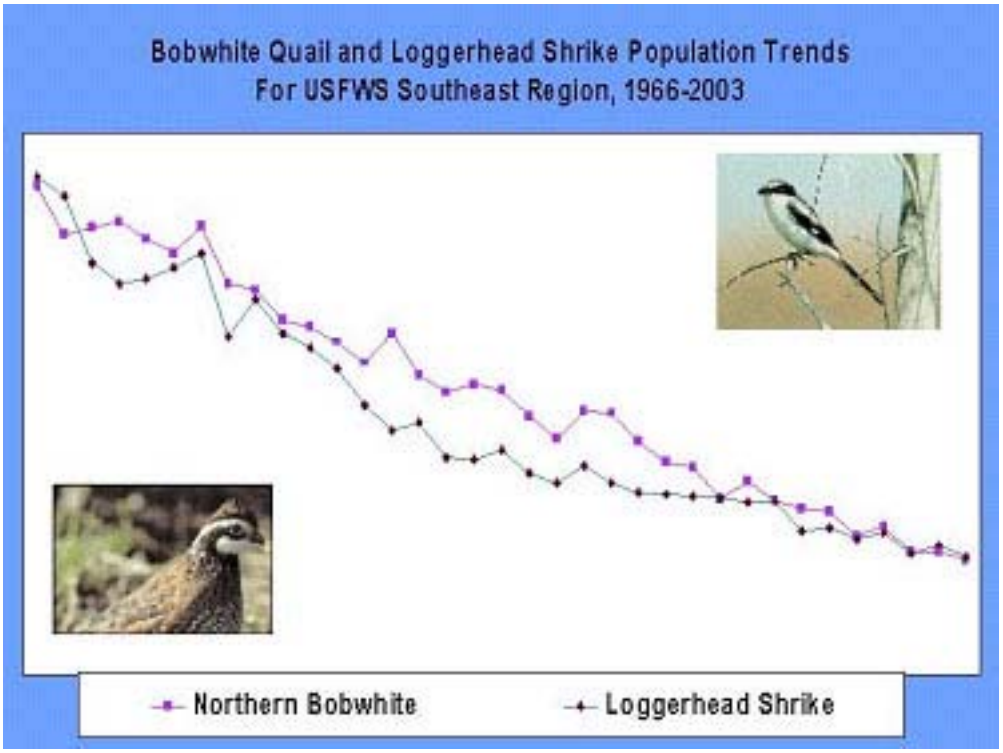
I recommend that CRP be maintained in the next Farm Bill at a minimum enrollment of the current level of 39 million acres; and if possible expanded to 45 million acres. One of the CRP's great strengths is its ability to improve habitat on the landscape scale. Research continues to show the importance of having large blocks of suitable habitat to support and increase populations of many wildlife species that are in jeopardy. As landscapes are increasingly fragmented, due to land use changes associated with intensive forestry, agriculture, and human population growth, this aspect of the CRP will become even more significant, not only for wildlife but for water quality and other resources as well.

Link CRP To National and State Wildlife Initiatives

In recent decades the wildlife profession has realized the biological, sociological and political importance of national and regional planning with respect to managing wildlife populations. A number of major initiatives now exist that set national, regional, and in certain cases, state habitat and population goals for various wildlife species. Examples of these initiatives include the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, the Sage Grouse and Prairie Grouse Conservation Plans, the North American Landbird Conservation Plan, the State Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategies and the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI). The CRP should be linked with these major initiatives, and this can be accomplished by modifying the Environmental Benefits Index.

The Southeast Quail Study Group (SEQSG), under direction of the SEAFWA Directors in March 2002, published the NBCI. NBCI is a 22-state initiative that is particularly important to SEAFWA states, southern wildlife conservationists and the public at large, in that it provides a roadmap for recovery of one of the South's most cherished birds, the Northern Bobwhite. Bobwhites were once very abundant across family farms and forestlands from the Midwest to the deep South. Unfortunately today bobwhites, along with at least 10 other grassland/shrub songbird species, are in serious decline. Populations have been declining since the early 1900's but the decline has become much more precipitous since the 1960's (see figure 1 below).

The plan sets bobwhite habitat and population recovery goals that, if achieved, will restore populations to 1980 level. Successful implementation of NBCI will require creating an estimated 2.8 million coveys on approximately 7 percent of 81 million acres of agricultural and forestlands. NBCI and its implementation is currently being expanded beyond the 16 southeastern states to include all 35 states that were once included in the historic range of the bird.



(Fig. 1) The CRP offers hope for increasing populations of bobwhites and other grass-land-shrub species, like the loggerhead shrike, that have declined dramatically as a result of habitat change.

Bobwhites and associated species are declining primarily due to large-scale land use changes associated with the conversion of native grasslands to exotic grass hay fields and closed canopy woodlands; intensive agriculture and monoculture forestry; and urban/suburban sprawl. The CRP is a natural fit with NBCI because bobwhites are dependent on habitats frequently impacted through natural or human induced disturbances. These disturbances, such as prescribed fire, timber thinning, rotational disking and planting, can be used to create and maintain the diversity of native grasses, forbs and shrubs that bobwhites and many other wildlife species require.

The good news is that through research and ongoing management programs, wildlife professionals have proven that it is ecologically and economically feasible to restore bobwhites through the judicial implementation of certain habitat management practices. These practices include establishing native grasses, forbs and shrubs around the edges of commercial crop fields, converting exotic grass pastures and hayfields to native warm season grasses, and practicing ecologically sound forest management.

It was this foundation of knowledge—and collaboration between the SEAFWA SEQSG and the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm Service Agency (FSA)—that led to the recent development of the CRP practice CP33 Habitat Buffers For Upland Birds.

Commonly called the Presidential Quail Initiative, because President George W. Bush announced it personally in August 2004, CP33 allocates 250,000 acres in the CRP Continuous Signup across 35 states in bobwhite range to establish native grass field buffers from 30 feet to 120 feet in width around the perimeter of crop fields. These buffers provide nesting and brood-rearing habitat for bobwhites, a lack of which wildlife biologist say most limits bobwhite populations across their range. Needless to say bobwhite and songbird conservationists are very excited about this practice and view it as an important first step toward achieving NBCI bobwhite recovery goals. Currently, more than 42,000 acres are enrolled into CP33. And while only in its first year, a number of landowners across the CP33 states already are reporting increased sightings of bobwhites and other wildlife.

Missouri landowners are excited about bobwhite reproduction they're witnessing on CP33 enrolled acres. Cass County Private Conservationist Nick Prough and Quail Unlimited Buffer Coordinator Andy Carmack report that farmers in their area are seeing bobwhites in the edge feathering, along the edge of crop fields, and under the tree line, where they hadn't been spotted in years. These same farmers also reported seeing quail in a buffer strip installed just one week before. Another Missouri landowner, who signed up for CP33 last year reported "seeing and hearing more bobwhite quail this spring than he can ever remember." In Georgia, CP33 has received the greatest participation of any of the Continuous CRP practices, and in some states all of the allotted acreage has been utilized.

According to Dr. Wes Burger, wildlife professor and bobwhite research specialist at Mississippi State University, Mr. Jimmy Bryan owner of B-Bryan Farm in Clay County Mississippi is reporting seeing quail broods and coveys in places he hasn't seen birds in years, since establishing field buffers, including CP 33, on his farm. Mr. Bryan has 195 acres of CP 33 buffers on his 1,200-acre farm.

In addition to improving habitat for bobwhites and other wildlife, CP33 will provide many other societal benefits as well by reducing soil erosion and improving water quality. I commend USDA for stepping forward with this practice as a proactive effort to address an ecological problem. Another important and unique aspect of CP33 is the cooperative effort between state wildlife agencies and USDA to monitor the response of bobwhites, songbirds and vegetation to the practice. Monitoring across multiple states will provide verification that CP33 is an environmentally sound use of public funds.

While CP33 is critical to the CRP for wildlife, it alone will not reverse the declines of bobwhites and grassland birds. But, bobwhite and grassland songbird restoration is achievable by improving other practices and aspects of the CRP and combining these with CP33 and other state, federal and private conservation programs to produce a synergistic landscape habitat response. This strategy will help to accomplish NBCI goals.

Twelve Southern states have developed, or are in the process of developing, research and management projects and/or multi-organizational task forces directed at implementing NBCI. In 1999, the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division began a state-funded pilot

program in 15 largely agricultural counties called the Georgia Bobwhite Quail Initiative (BQI). This program was in certain aspects modeled after CRP in that it is a voluntary and competitive program with a type of environmental benefits index used to rank landowner habitat practice proposals for the provision of financial incentives. Through technical assistance and financial incentives BQI promotes the management of native vegetation through establishment of field buffers, field corners, hedgerows, filter strips, and heavy thinning, with frequent prescribed burning of pine stands. Some of these practices are currently offered (for example CP33 field buffers, CP2 native grasses and legumes) and others could be included or required (for example conversion of CP1 and CP10 exotic grasses to native grasses and required heavy thinning and burning of CP11 pine stands) in the CRP for agricultural, range and forestlands.

BQI monitoring of bobwhites and songbirds has shown a positive response to BQI practices. In 2004 monitoring found bobwhite occurrence to be 60 percent higher on treatment fields than control fields. Songbird occurrence also has increased dramatically as determined by researchers at the University of Georgia, who found a 30 percent increase in nine sparrow species the first year after BQI practices were implemented, and three of these species did not even occur on the farm until the first year post-treatment. Additionally, the program is popular with farmers and landowners. Demand for enrollment far exceeds the available funding. A survey of 102 BQI enrolled landowners in December 2004 found that 94 percent rated their program experience as good to excellent, 91 percent said the over all environmental condition of their farm had been improved, 81 percent reported that bobwhite populations had increased on their property, while 82 percent said songbirds had increased. Similar results have been attained in other states.

While BQI and other state-funded efforts are being implemented, they do not have the necessary funding to meet NBCI goals. NBCI can only be achieved by partnering state programs with federal programs like those available in the Farm Bill. The CRP, more than any other federal conservation program, has the potential, although as of yet unrealized, to improve habitat for bobwhites over a broad landscape.

If properly managed, the currently enrolled CRP habitats, specifically the 10.1 million acres enrolled in the CP1, CP10, CP3 and CP11 practices in the 22 NBCI states should support 2.2 million bobwhite coveys. This represents 81 percent of the NBCI bobwhite recovery goal. Thus, the same successes that the CRP is providing for waterfowl, pheasants and other wildlife in the Northern Great Plains and Midwest are possible for bobwhites and grassland birds in the South.

This level of population recovery requires: 1) CP33 (Habitat Buffers For Upland Birds) acreage allotment must be maintained or expanded; 2) Pine stands considered for re-enrollment in CP3 and CP11 must have enhanced ground cover management requirements, especially thinning, frequent prescribed burning and/or mechanical and/or chemical treatments; 3) CP1 and CP10 exotic grass acres must be converted to native warm season grasses; and 4) the Longleaf Pine Conservation

Priority Area must be maintained with the longleaf practices included in CRP Continuous Sign-up.

Retain and Emphasize National and State Priority Areas:

Designated priority areas are an important part of the CRP Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) and should be maintained in the program. Of particular importance to bobwhites and numerous other wildlife species in the deep South is the CRP Longleaf Pine Conservation Priority Area (LLCPA).

At the time of European settlement, longleaf pine covered up to 90 million acres. But today it has declined by more than 90 percent to less than 3 million acres. Land use conversion to agriculture and other forest types are the primary factors in the longleaf pine ecosystem decline. Myriad wildlife species are found in the longleaf pine ecoystem, and many species are in decline. In addition to northern bobwhites and a host of high conservation priority songbirds, a number of federally listed endangered and threatened species will benefit from LPE restoration. Listed species that rely heavily on the LPE include red-cockaded woodpeckers, western (LA, MS, and western AL) population of gopher tortoise, the Mississippi gopher frog, the Eastern indigo snake, and the Flatwoods salamander. Additional species that prosper in the longleaf pine ecosystem are declining to the extent that without restoration, they may soon become candidates for listing.

FSA is to be commended for establishing the Longleaf Pine CPA. This designation has resulted in the establishment of more than 200,000 acres of new longleaf pine habitat. The non-profit Longleaf Alliance has submitted a proposal to FSA requesting a CRP Continuous Enrollment Category for high priority longleaf pine enrollments totaling some 350,000 acres in nine southern states. The Southern Group of State Foresters, SEAFWA states, and numerous conservation agencies and organizations have endorsed this proposal, which if approved will: 1) further the success of NBCI; 2) aid threatened and endangered species recovery efforts; and 3) help prevent additional species from being listed.

Stagger Re-enrollments Based On Habitat Quality:

Currently, USDA is facing the tremendous challenge of dealing with some 16 million acres of expiring CRP contracts in the next two years. The challenges are to distribute the workload, while at the same time ensuring an equitable emphasis on soil, water and wildlife. Automatic re-enrollment of all CRP acres will not meet either of these criteria. As previously mentioned, there is a wide range of wildlife habitat quality on existing CRP acres across the nation. For example, in the Northern Plains most CRP lands were planted to diverse grass and legume stands and have received sufficient management to maintain relatively high soil, water and wildlife values through the term of the CRP contract. Conversely, in the East and South millions of the CRP acres are occupied by monocultures of exotic grasses like fescue and closed canopy loblolly or slash pine trees. These sites, while meeting soil and water quality mandates, provide very poor wildlife value. Finally, in all regions there are examples that fall in-between the two extremes,

where cover conditions provide moderate values for wildlife but for which management upgrades are feasible and needed to fully meet the CRP requirements.

The workload distribution and the wildlife quality issue can be simultaneously addressed by staggering re-enrollments based on a quality rating in the following categories: 1) automatic re-enrollment of those contracts that fully meet the statutory requirement of equitable emphasis on soil, water and wildlife; 2) contract extensions of one-to-two-years on lands where cover conditions are below the required standard but which can be upgraded through management, then re-enrolled when fully upgraded; and 3) denying contracts that are in monoculture cover and which provide little or no wildlife value, or otherwise require the establishment of the desired wildlife cover conditions prior to re-enrollment and the provision of funding.

Specific to category 3, conversion to native warm season grasses should be required for CRP CP1 and CP 10 acres in fescue, bahia and Bermuda grass monocultures. Exotic grass monocultures provide little or no wildlife value, and in fact are detrimental to many wildlife species. They inhibit mobility of ground-dwelling birds like bobwhite quail and out-compete native food and cover plants. These grasses are so aggressive that it is impossible to upgrade their quality through inter-seeding native plants or rotational disturbance.

Likewise, closed canopy pine stands with sparse groundcover provide little wildlife value. On the positive side suitable ground cover can be restored easily in pine stands through heavy thinning (less than 50 square feet basal area per acre), frequent (2 to 3 year rotation) prescribed burning and/or selective herbicides and/or mechanical disturbance. These are available as CRP mid-contract management practices but must be required if they are to be implemented. This recreates a habitat type known as “pine savannah,” which at one time covered tens of millions of acres in the South. To truly benefit bobwhites and grassland birds, thinning must be much heavier than what typically occurs for maximum timber production. However, this should not pose an economic problem to producers with stands enrolled in the CRP, since the annual rental payments more than offset the forgone timber production and the producer still ends up with a valuable commercial forest stand at the end of the CRP contract. In fact, one economic model shows the annualized rate of return for a CRP pine stand at 15 years of age (and prior to any timber harvest) is 24 percent. Currently, there are about 1.6 million acres of pine stands in CRP.

If landowners choose not to upgrade and re-enroll tree plantings, then acreage could be directed to other practices, for example a whole field fallow practice and/or enrollment of field corners and hedgerows that provide the full range of soil, water and wildlife benefits. Additionally, past experience with tree planting on agricultural lands has shown that less than two percent of these acres would be taken out of forest production and put back into crop production even if they were removed from the CRP. Thus, the soil and water benefits will continue to occur without the continued investment of taxpayer dollars.

Form State Habitat Teams:

One of the inherent challenges in implementing the CRP at the landscape scale is that "one size doesn't fit all" with respect to wildlife management practices. Due to national and regional differences in soils and climatic conditions, practices that work well in one state or region may be marginal or even detrimental in another. **To address this issue and to make the program the best it can be, State Habitat Teams should be formed to establish criteria for selecting contracts for re-enrollment. These teams should be comprised of professional wildlife biologists from the respective state wildlife agencies, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, State FSA Director or designee and other natural resource professionals as the Team deems appropriate**. The Team's primary function should be to determine the status of cover types on acres proposed for re-enrollment and to determine the appropriate covers to be established on new enrollments. A successful model already exists within the CRP for this approach with the recent establishment of State Habitat Teams to guide the implementation of CP33.

Revise The Environmental Benefits Index:

The EBI is the primary factor in determining the wildlife benefits ultimately resulting from CRP contracts. The CRP is required by statute to place equal emphasis on soil, water and wildlife. However, within the EBI there are six factors that determine contract acceptance. These include: 1) wildlife habitat, 2) water quality, 3) soil erosion, 4) enduring benefits, 5) air quality, and 6) cost. When all are taken into account, wildlife is not equally weighted with soil and water. **In short, the CRP could be enhanced, particularly in the South, by revising the EBI to place emphasis on: 1) simplification and equitable allocation of points between all resources, 2) re-defining appropriate vegetative covers, which could best be accomplished by allowing each State Habitat Team (with FSA national office oversight) to develop their own N1 wildlife cover factor, 3) re-instate an N1 cover factor multiplier, similar to that used in CRP sign-ups 15-20, 4) reduce or even eliminate the N4 enduring benefits factor, and 5) link the EBI with major wildlife initiatives like NBCI and State Wildlife Agency Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategies.**

Increase Technical Assistance and Compliance:

Additional funding for technical staff within USDA and for the establishment of contribution agreement positions with state wildlife agencies is critically needed. The CRP practices are not being fully delivered in some areas because workloads exceed the capacity of USDA field office staff. Additional personnel also are needed to increase compliance checks and make sure that practices are being established and maintained as prescribed. This has the added benefit of building positive relationships with producers and improving education and outreach relative to other programs and resource issues. Incentive and cost share payments should be made only after practices are properly installed and compliance checks have been conducted.

Assess and Adjust CRP Rental Rates:

In addition to technical delivery, the other key ingredient for producer participation is an adequate level of financial incentives. In certain areas and for certain practices actual cash rental rates (CCR) are well above the CRP soil rental rates (SRR). For example in one Iowa county the average CRP SRR is $54 less than the CCR. Experience has shown that few producers will be attracted to re-enrollment—or new enrollment—under this scenario. Additionally, for CP33 a separate and higher rental rate is needed for irrigated lands, which make up a high percentage of many agricultural landscapes. This is economically justified, as irrigated CCRs are much higher than dry land CCRs. It is biologically justified because these irrigated buffers produce better food and cover for wildlife during drought years than dry land buffers. I recommend that FSA assess and adjust rental rates as needed to make the program equally attractive to producers across all regions.

Maintain Mid-Contract Management

In 2004, FSA directed state offices to work with State Technical Committees to develop mid-contract management guidelines for new and existing CRP contracts. Cost-share for these management activities would be provided where appropriate to enhance wildlife habitat values of the CRP while still preserving the soil erosion and water quality benefits of these fields. This directive represented a substantial change of policy on behalf of the FSA and provided the suite of management options and incentives that many in the wildlife community had been requesting since inception of the CRP. Although specific guidelines varied from state to state, in general they permitted, cost-shared, and in some cases, required management activities such as strip-disking, prescribed fire, and herbicidal control of invasive species on grasslands as well as thinning, prescribed fire, disking, and use of selective herbicides on mid-rotation pine plantations. This is a very positive step toward upgrading CRP habitats for wildlife and should be maintained in the program.

Conclusion:

Again Mr. Chairman I appreciate the opportunity to provide input on this program, which is so critical to the environmental and economic welfare of our nation. I sincerely hope that these comments will stimulate discussion and action relative to keeping the many aspects of the CRP that are currently working and improving those that need adjustment. If I can be of assistance at any time, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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Reference:

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